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A Describable and Indescribable Figure in Henry James's "The Figure in the Carpet"

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I

Henry James often used the first-person point of view in his short fiction. The world seen from this point of view is naturally narrow and limited. And so, the mystery of its periphery which the first-person point of view cannot elucidate is strongly impressed on us, readers. In other words, Henry James taught us explicitly the existence of unknown regions which baffle the understanding of a solitary self, by presenting his fictional world from the first-person point of view. The more develops the knowledge of the solitary self whose view is all we can learn, the more deepens the mystery of the world surrounding the self. And we find our interest rising in the deepening mystery and read at one stretch the story he narrates. Besides, enigmas often remain unsolved in James's stories, unlike in ordinary mysteries. Consequently, left in a fog, we wonder what James is going to convey by leaving the mystery of his fiction unriddled or by deepening its mysteriousness.

And "The Figure in the Carpet" (hereafter referred to as "The Figure"), which I am going to deal with in this paper, is one of his most puzzling stories, in which the point of view is limited to that of one person, that is, a young critic who narrates the story. While reading this story, we find the young critic-narrator's limited mental horizon becomes precisely our own, and it seems as though we

have no means to go beyond this horizon. The critic-narrator, in spite of his critical "acuteness,"[1] feels helpless and distressed as if confined in prison, being unable to find out the figure in the novels of Hugh Vereker, great novelist of rising reputation. And we are obliged to share the painful sense of frustration with the narrator. Besides, because of there being no line of Vereker's presented in the text, it seems impossible for us to make up for his inadequate understanding and alleviate his distress as well as our own.

Perhaps, partly because of the nonexistence of Vereker's own writings, Joseph Warren Beach discussed the novels of Henry James on the supposition that they could be substituted for those of Hugh Vereker. Thus, on the pretense of discovering the figure of Vereker, Beach tried to describe a figure in James's works, the result of which seems to me utter failure. However, his failure teaches us one thing, that is, the probable impossibility of finding out the most truthful figure not only in the works of Vereker but also in those of Henry James or any other writer. In other words, Beach's failure has aroused in our mind a suspicion that there is no grasping the ultimate essence of a writer's works even if they are read and read with care. Beach says one of the essentials in the works of James is, for instance, the unbiased and perceptive mind capable of relativizing itself and transcending the value of utility. And he further says the characters who have "moral perceptions" are more loved by their creator Henry James than those who don't.[2]

What Beach pointed out seems too banal to be accepted as a wonderful figure of James, though it has been acknowledged as a wellgrounded opinion and it is now considered unrefutably right and proper. One of the reasons his indication seems banal is that it is abstracted from the text and presented as if it were an

immovable truth. It is needless to say a fixed truth soon becomes uninteresting and vapid. Truth will have to be a changeable thing, which we come to realize while reading or living. We are never allowed to fix it beforehand. And if it may be allowed to say more, what Beach pointed out seems only the repetition of what had been said about the works of James until then, though the repetition was the result of Beach's own close and thorough study. For instance, Joseph Conrad said, already in 1905, about James that he was "the historian of fine conscience." [3] Ten-odds years after, Beach surely threw much supplementary light upon so-called essentials in James's works. But I think it was nothing but the detailed but commonplace representation of what had been perceived and to some extent expressed in words until then.

This seems to indicate that what Beach pointed out does not serve as a clue for the figure in the works of Hugh Vereker, because any able critic will be able to indicate in his own way, sooner or later, what Beach pointed out, while the young critic-narrator in "The Figure" was never able to discover Vereker's figure in spite of his growing reputation as an able critic. The narrator would surely have found Vereker's figure if it were to be considered akin to the one described by Beach. But in spite of his sharpness and strenuous efforts, he is never able to find out Vereker's figure. Needless to say, if the figure of Vereker were simply akin to the figure Beach found in the works of James, the narrator would have no excuse for being considered to be an utter fool. And we, too, will be inevitably regarded as silly persons, who have been mystified by the tale told by a mere obtuse critic-narrator. "The Figure," told by an obtuse critic, would be inevitably regarded as a mere humdrum, a tedious and unsubstantial story.

But, this isn't of course a right way of viewing the story. "The

Figure" is undoubtedly one of the superb novelettes of James's which are never to be held in a low estimation. The narrator, who is also a central character in the story, is a passably able critic. It may be said that he is a trifle more competent than Beach. Because, though both of them seem to have thought the figure of James or Vereker to be describable, the narrator was at least not so gullible as Beach, who really described innocently a surprisingly plain and easy figure of James.

The indescribability of Vereker's figure, however, has been given much light on of late. To be more precise, the reason his figure is considered indescribable has been recently explained to some extent by several critics. Their explanation is surely very convincing, but there are some problematical points in their arguments. In the next chapter I am going to introduce and examine their contentions summarily.

II

Why the critic-narrator in "The Figure" cannot find out the figure of Vereker is the very problem that has troubled the reader's mind most. And recently various answers have been given to this problem, some of which have a certain similarity to one another. According to these answers, the narrator fails to discover the figure because he regards it as a completed and fixed one. They say he thinks all he has to do is to follow the drawn lines of the figure. He does not realize the figure is a changeable one, which he must depict in accordance with the experience he has while reading a work of Vereker. This argument for the reader's own experience and creation seems irrefutably right and convincing.

Only, many critics have further offered various kinds of

seemingly plausible opinions as to why the narrator's friend, George Corvick succeeded in finding out the figure. And it is these opinions of theirs that are hard to accept. It is true that they have tried to give the most acceptable answer to this question. But, contrary to their intention, the harder they try, the more farfetched their arguments seem to become. For example, Leo B. Levy argued that Corvick and his wife Gwendolen were able to discern the figure because of their love for each other.[4] Levy's opinion is based on that of Quentin Anderson who said : "The critics in 'The Figure in the Carpet' . . . have before them an authentically great novelist, whose intention they cannot discover because they have no power to love."[5] By framing his thought roughly following this opinion of Anderson's, Levy made the boring mistake of ristricting the world of the story within narrow limits. In other words, Levy's argument that it is nothing less than love which makes it possible to discover the figure excludes other different views of readers who do not know what love is. This argument, which privileges only the specified readers, will be said to be unnecessarily exclusive.

However, it is not that Levy does not acknowledge the importance of the reader's experience, for he says : ". . . the work of art is not independent of the reader's experience but draws upon his capacity to bring to it an appropriate moral and psychological readiness. The figure in the carpet is much a function of the reader's 'exquisite scheme' as it is the writer's."[6] And the importance of the reader's own interpretation is also affirmed by Dorothy M. Boland, who says : "What Vereker has perhaps presented, then, is not a specific 'system,' but rather an approximation so close to life that it allows all levels of interpretation."[7] In spite of the recognition, Boland also ristricts the reader's experience of the story

within narrow limits almost in the same way as Levy. For she thinks Vereker's figure can be discovered only by the characters who have become aware of what she calls "karmic law." Interpreting Vereker's saying that "I do it in my way," Boland says : "Each character has his own particular role by the necessity of his karmic development, and it is mere recognition of this 'little trick' (p. 231) that can bring release." [8] Her argument may be put in another way. For example, the figure could be discovered only by those who have attained spiritual enlightenment and freed themselves from various forces working around them to involve them in worldly passions. Boland says one of the characters who have achieved the enlightenment is George Corvick, who has gone to India and there reached "a higher level of awareness." According to her, the awareness is integrated into "one right combination" and finally made into "the ultimate spoken word, after which," she says borrowing a Buddhism student's words, "there follows only silence." [9] This is rather unabashed affirmation of absolute knowledge, which seems liable to make light of the knowledge of the unenlightened. Boland seems to pretend not to deny it by arguing that all levels of experience or knowledge are acceptable as a starting point of enlightenment. But the fact of the matter is that Boland subordinates the state of being unenlightened to that of enlightenment. So, this is also an exclusive maintenance like that of Levy.

Boland seems oblivious of the fact that we are sometimes enlightened and sometimes not. It must not be forgotten that it is only sometimes that we can attain spiritual liberation. And besides, usually, our liberated state does not continue for a long time. Furthermore, it is not that the unliberated state in which we usually live does not generate many things of value. Karma is not only the force the recognition of which enables us to attain higher

perception but also the force which involves us in its forceful movement when we are really living. The recognition of it is surely desirable for our freedom, but if such knowledge were always to control our life, a great many valuable things would disappear from our life. In other words, to live involved in worldly passions is necessary for us even if it means our subordination to karma. The freedom attained by the understanding of karma is only one aspect of our life in spite of its great importance, and therefore it will be considered one-sidedly exclusive to argue that the freedom enables us to discover Vereker's figure.

And Rachel Salmon, too, admitting the figure being woven by creative reading, restricts its way of being woven almost in the same way as Levy and Boland. To be more precise, Salmon holds Gwendolen in the highest estimation. According to Salmon, the woman novelist Gwendolen transforms herself after her marriage to George Corvick by harmonizing her life with her art, which enables her to discover Vereker's figure. When he says "the figure exists for those capable of seeing it," Salmon surely seems to admit the possibility of various ways of discovering the figure. But, as a matter of fact, he admits only the way of a specified person like Gwendolen who he says has achieved her "transformation."[10]

As mentioned above, many critics have recognized the figure can be woven by the reader's experience of the story, but as if they were going to deny their own acknowledgement at a moment's notice, they have restricted the reader's experience within narrow limits. In short, in order to discover the figure, they argue, the reader has to know, through imagination or life experience, what love or karmic law or transformation is. But, there is no denying that reading experience, if restricted in this way, will inevitably lose its original richness and complexity. Then, it becomes very

doubtful whether the figure is valuable enough to be known at the cost of such a great loss. If the figure is really so exclusive as to admit no other way of reading, to read the story will inevitably become uninteresting and tedious. Besides, this restrictive way of reading a story is not only against the general intentions of many authors but also against the general function of words and sentences, which usually allows us various kinds of interpretation.

Then, are we always forbidden to depend on any kind of restrictive reading? If so, such a critic as Hillis Miller will be thought much of, for he argues the general impossibility of interpretation. Miller says: "There is no way to know. James's story remains alogical, caught in the oscillation among these various possibilities." And he further says that it is not only the reader but also the author that is liable to fall a victim to "the lure of single and totalizable meaning." The author as well as the reader, lured by its seeming readability, thinks any text has "some logos." Miller says "readability" and "unreadability" of text form the two sides of a coin and that the reader usually tries to get a real meaning of text, only to realize the impossibility of getting it. "The Figure," Miller says, is the very fictionalization of this experience of general "unreadability." He further argues that Vereker's "general intention" exists "behind, or below, the work and yet 'in' it too" and that the figure woven by his "general intention" also exists "as an immanent and yet transcendent pattern within and behind the work." In short, Miller affirms, it is nothing but "logos." It functions as "Immanent law," and existing within every part of the text, it gives the reader "the false promise of satisfaction" which only leads to "the abyss of death." In other words, Vereker's figure is "a food which becomes a means of excecution" and lures the reader by the light of "readability," only to leave him in the

labyrinth of "unreadability." [11] The reader may entertain the illusion that he is following the line of the figure closely while reading, but he never reaches the end of the line and the figure is never to be completed. The ultimate form of the figure is never to be realized.

Then, it may be thought that Corvick was only under illusion when he thought he had succeeded in discovering the figure of Vereker. When he thought he discovered the secret of the figure, he sent a telegram to his future wife Gwendolen Erme, saying "Eureka." Then he went to see Vereker in order to have him ascertain that his newly found figure was proper and right, and Vereker acknowledged this as true. Therefore, if we believe in Miller's argument, both Corvick and Vereker will be considered to be under the same illusion. It must be thought after all they have happened to draw the same figure. Moreover, Corvick's newly-wed wife Gwendolen, who hears from her husband what the figure is like before he is killed in a dog-cart accident on their honeymoon, comes to value it as her "life" (p. 266). So, it will be considered she too is under the same illusion both her husband and Vereker cherish. Then, have all of these three characters woven the same pattern in accordance with the same illusion ? If so, they will be considered to have eaten what Miller calls "a food which becomes a means of execution." It seems inevitable that they all fall into "the abyss of death." After all, "The Figure" will be thought to be a mere foolish story which centers around the three main characters who are all duped into believing in the figure which is, according to Miller, a misrepresentation of the text. And moreover, the story is told by the narrator who also believes the figure to be really describable, in spite of his inability to delineate it.

If Miller's interpretation is right, "The Figure" will be

inevitably considered to be a dull story concerning the four duped main characters, who all believe in the describability of the figure in spite of its impossibility. Then, must we always deny describing a clear figure when we read a book? Is it not possible for us to read the text and describe our own figure without denying its unreadability? This way of reading may seem to leave contradictions as they are. But, isn't this exactly what we usually do while reading a story? When we are reading some kind of fiction, we sometimes get contradictory impressions from the text. And yet we continue reading without solving the contradiction. And sometimes we try to unify our impressions of the text, though such unification always deviates from our actual impressions. It is true that the unification of meanings always misleads us, but in spite of this, it is very natural for us to try to grasp some important consistent meaning from the text. In other words, both grasping some meaning and receiving various impressions are what we usually do while reading, though the two may seem contradictory to each other. On the other hand, all Miller and other critics do is voice their own one-sided opinions. In short, they either extract one meaning from the text or deny all its meanings.

It is true that Miller's denying of every meaning is very significant and valuable because we are easily possessed with some fixed meaning. But it must not be forgotten that to believe in his theory sincerely is liable to become another fixed idea. Needless to say, James disliked any kind of obsession and yet he knew the continual disliking was in danger of becoming another obsession. So he created such a character as Basil Ransom in *The Bostonians*, whose way of believing in his ideology is not enthusiastic at all but very cool and detached. Basil sticks to the positive value of his ideology only when another kind of ideology becomes dominant. James

knows it is impossible for us to live without being possessed with any ideology and that to try to deny all kinds of ideology easily becomes another form of obsession. So, it becomes very important for us to play with the ideology which dominates us, though Miller and other critics of James don't know this way of playing. They either deny every meaning or believe in one of them too seriously. They don't seem to have thought of connecting the serious way with the playful one to describe Vereker's figure, in spite of the fact that Vereker's speech and behavior are often both playful and serious. I want to look into this problem of Vereker's capricious way of life, following closely the text of "The Figure" in the ensuing chapters.

III

The narrator-critic got acquainted with Vereker at the house of Lady Jane, both of them having been invited by her with several other guests. At first, the narrator was favorably impressed with Vereker, but an unfortunate accident happened to them. On the spur of the moment, Vereker spoke slightly of the narrator's criticism of his new novel before company as he did not know the author of the criticism was among the guests. Though admitting the criticism is "a charming article," Vereker complains that "the author doesn't see . . . anything." And putting low value not only on the narrator's criticism but also on all the other ones written by critics of Vereker, the novelist says, "Nobody does" (pp. 226-227). This sounds exceedingly inflated and haughty. His personality seems to the narrator awfully self-centered and arrogant. However, the reason Vereker denied all the criticisms of his work becomes clear later, because he comes to beg the narrator's pardon

for his unintentional insult. Vereker offers his sincere apology and tells him what the real intention of his comment was. Moreover he says heartwarming words to the narrator, feeling anxious about his hurt feelings. The narrator, completely appeased by these words of Vereker and deeply impressed with his sympathetic and warmhearted solicitude, thinks about him in the following way :

> It was plain he really feared I was hurt, and the sense of his solicitude suddenly made all the difference to me. My cheap review fluttered off into space, and the best things I had said in it became flat enough beside the brilliancy of his being there. (p. 228)

The narrator, here, becomes conscious for the first time that it is not Vereker but he who has been self-centered and conceited. Though he thought his criticism of Vereker's newest novel very brilliant, he now feels its brilliancy is nothing "beside the brilliancy of his〔Vereker's〕being there." Undoubtedly, this was the very thing he should have known when he was writing his criticism He should have understood any criticism is liable to be revenged by the text, because criticism always deviates from the text by sticking to its own logic. It can be said that any text of fiction dislikes its meaning being determined in a fixed way. It is nothing but the nature of the text that repulses any fixed meaning given to itself. Therefore, it may be said that the revenge of the text becomes the bitterest when it is criticized most convincingly. For the most persuasive criticism defines the meaning of the text most clearly, and its convincing definition is liable to deprive us of our own free and unfettered way of interpretation. As Vereker says, it is not because the narrator's criticism is dull and uninteresting but because it is exceptionally sharp that aroused the bitter and ironical remarks of the novelist. And when Vereker says his "little point" is

missed in the narrator's criticism, he does not mean a sharper criticism is necessary to find it, for even in a sharper criticism we could only find such keywords as "love," "karma" and "transformation." Finding as many keywords as possible does not lead to a discovery of Vereker's "little point" but only to confusion.

Then, how can we find Vereker's "little point" that is said by the novelist himself to have been missed in every criticism on his work? Vereker himself tries to suggest it in various ways. For example, it is defined as "the very passion of his passions" or "the finest fullest intention of the lot" (pp. 230-231). And it is said to be found in every book of his. Though it is a secret to everybody, "that's only because it's a secret in spite of itself" (p. 232). To Vereker himself, it is "as palpable as the marble" of the chimney before him. And the clue to it is to be found in "every page and line and letter" of his works (p. 233). In other words, every sentence is the clue to it. To extract a sentence from its context and emphasize its importance, however, never leads to a discovery of Vereker's "little point," for such an extraction is to sever a sentence from its context and break a living connection between them. Such an extraction resembles vivisection, the inevitable result of which is the death of the text. As Vereker himself says, his point cannot be divided into "form" and "feeling." It must be grasped in its totality, being "the organ of life" like "a heart" (pp. 233-234). And he further says : ". . . it is the joy of my soul. . . . The loveliest thing in the world" (p. 235).

The narrator, not knowing how to make out these remarks of Vereker, asks him again about it when he visits him several days after. He inquires of Vereker whether it is "something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet" (p. 240). Vereker approves of this phrase and says about it in other words : "It's the very string . . .

that my pearls are strung on !" (p. 241). If we compare the latter's image with that of the former, we will be able to notice there is a subtle difference between them. To be more precise, the former gives us the impression that weaving the figure is already finished, while the latter's form is not completed yet. In other words, the latter's form is going to be decided in the future. So, the reason the former was highly approved of by Vereker may have been that it was thought to be a carpet the figure of which we must weave according to our impressions of the text. However, this does not mean that we are allowed to weave our own figure arbitrarily. This is because we have to follow the movement of the textual life. If only we don't run counter to the movement, we may be allowed to derive from the text such keywords as "love," "karma" and "transformation." Only, we are never allowed to establish one of them as the only true clue, for it is to restrict the world of the story within narrow limits and to choke off the freedom of interpretation.

The narrator, however, cannot infer what has been considered above, in spite of his critical ability and hard efforts. The result of his hard efforts is not only his failure but also his realization that Vereker's novels have become not so interesting as before. This is naturally expected because his efforts to find the figure is liable to dampen the pleasure of reading. The secret of enjoying a story is to read without any fixed idea. But the narrator, obsessed with the idea of Vereker's figure existing in a fixed form in the text, gradually begins to lose interest in his novels and finally gives up his attempt to find the figure completely. And the narrator counts on his friend George Corvick to find it, instead of making efforts himself. It will be said at this point of time the narrator has been destined never to succeed in finding Vereker's figure, for it is to be

discovered only by those who intend to weave their own figure according to the experience they have while reading works of Vereker's. Even if Corvick succeeds in finding it, it is nothing but his own, which may be accepted by many other people but shall never become their own figure.

Corvick, being told by the narrator about the figure, immediately gets enthusiastic about it. Besides, he never gives up his attempt to find it unlike the narrator. He even goes to India to attain his purpose and finally receives the rewards of his labors. In short, he succeeds in discovering Vereker's figure. And moreover, he hurriedly takes the trouble to go and see Vereker in order to be confirmed by the novelist that the figure he has found is proper and right. Vereker approves of the figure and this confirmation of his success enables him to realize his long cherished hope of marrying Gwendolen. Gwendolen is a woman novelist and shares admiration of Vereker with Corvick. Evanescently enough, however, Corvick is killed in a cab accident in their honeymoon, and the narrator deplores the loss of the chance to be informed of the figure Corvick found as strongly as his death. So, he begins to pay frequent visits to the bereaved wife Gwendolen, expecting to hear from her what her late husband told about the discovered figure.

Much to his chagrin, however, he receives a flat refusal from her, though she informs him of the fact she was told about the figure by her late husband. And moreover, as if tantalizing him, she adds : "I mean to keep it to myself" (p. 263). This remark surely seems needlessly vexing and cruel. So, the narrator says to her out of spite, "It's nothing," which Gwendolen refutes by saying "It's my life" (p. 266). It is partly because of this remark of hers that many critics have attached a little too great importance to Vereker's figure. It may be said that many critics have made a

mistake in thinking that her "life" must have the same importance to other people as well. As mentioned many times, some of them went so far as to say that Vereker's figure which is her "life" ought to be understood by learning what "love," "karma" or "transformation" means. However, it seems to me all that is clear about the figure is that it cannot be described as the only true one, as was said before. The figure which Gwendolen says is her "life" is bound to change like life itself whenever she reads a book of Vereker's anew, though the change may be subtle. One of the essentials she learned from her late husband is perhaps that she must weave a figure by her own hands and that the figure woven in this way is not a universal truth. This may be rather a matter-of-fact and disheartening conclusion. And that is perhaps the main reason she does not want to tell the narrator the secret of the figure in spite of his earnest request. Describing a figure that way is surely common, but the figure drawn like that is uncomparably valuable to her. Not being a critic herself, she does not feel it necessary to express it in critical words, but what she has learned from the works of Vereker goes on living within herself. It is, as she says, her "life."

As has been suggested, Vereker's figure can be thought to be an ever changing one which cannot be expressed in a fixed and determined form. However hard critics may endeavor to give expression to it, what is expressed never takes the ultimate form. From the start, such a thing as the ultimate truth does not exist. But this does not mean that it is impossible to describe a truthful figure. What a critic could do is to describe a figure according to the deepest impressions left upon his mind without regarding it as the only truth. Some may say this is the very thing that has been done by many critics. But their criticism seems to me too exclusive to be

suggestive of the figure of Vereker. Then, what way of describing the figure can be thought to be really convincing ? To get a clue to this problem, I am going to examine in some detail what Vereker did and said when the narrator went to see him for the second time.

IV

Soon after their first meeting, the narrator receives a letter from Vereker asking not to say anything to anyone about what they talked the other day. But the narrator had already talked to his friend Corvick about Vereker's figure when he received the letter. So, he is obliged to visit Vereker to offer him an apology, and as soon as he meets the novelist, he hurries into apologies. He is of course forgiven by Vereker, who bursts into involuntary laughter to see the narrator's confused look and hurry-scurry apologetic manner. And he not only forgives the narrator but also takes a pleasure in talking with him again. Unfortunately, however, this good humor of Vereker is rated low by the narrator. To be more precise, the latter involuntarily thinks Vereker must be "a man of unstable moods" (p. 240). Controlled by the mood of the moment, he is sometimes spiteful, sometimes cheerful, the narrator thinks. The other day, he criticized the narrator's review severely, and soon after this he repented of having done so and took the trouble to come and apologize for his unintentional rude words. And this time, too, he acted fitfully, for he wrote a capricious letter asking the narrator to make a secret of what they had talked several days before, only because he wanted to enjoy the present situation in which his figure is not known to anybody. Judging from these capricious and fitful doings of Vereker's, the narrator thinks, his

figure may not be as important as he claims it is.

Regrettably, the narrator is completely unaware that Vereker's "unstable moods" are not only what is produced by his vigor but what has brought about the present friendly relations between them. Owing to the whimsicality of Vereker, the narator was able to get intimate with Vereker and enjoy an interesting talk with him. Besides, he was furnished with several hints as to the novelist's figure, though he cannot succeed in making the most of them. And surely it cannot be denied, either, that he seems to have very little chance to find Vereker's figure in the near future, but his inability to do so perhaps enables him to realize there is something beyond his intelligence. And such realization will prevent him from becoming cocksure of his own criticism.

Besides, Vereker's "unstable moods" bear some relation with what he says about his own figure. At first sight, his "moods" seem to have nothing to do with "the thread" that Vereker says his "pearls are strung on" (p. 241). But the former can be connected with the latter, because of the life force both of them seem to have. As suggested before, Vereker's thread of figure can be thought of as something like a stream of life, and his "unstable moods" also have close connection with his liveliness. It will be said that mood is usually unstable when it is on a life stream, for the stream of consciousness or mood of which our inner life is chiefly made up doesn't usually flow straight and evenly. Indeed, sometimes it flows smooth and straight, but soon it winds and meanders, instability being its own nature.

It may be said that the instability of mood can be seen typically, for example, in Isabel Archer, the heroine of *The Portrait of a Lady*. Her mood is unstable from the beginning of the novel to its end. And her instability will never be cured as long as she lives her

own life. Though many critics have expressed various opinions about her last decision to stay with her tyrannical husband, they do not seem to understand that her seemingly shaky decision is the good evidence that she has been constant in her lively and fitful nature. It shows us both the consistency of her vitality and her vital natural inconsistency.

What must be added further is that this kind of instability does not exclude its opposite, that is, stability. Instability of this kind does not always request the state of being unstable. It can be stable for a time on occasion. Consistency of instability easily becomes unnatural and unlively. Instability must be the result of naturalness of life before everything. If instability is sought for instability's sake, it immediately stops being natural and lively. This kind of instability which is the natural state of our life and therefore does not exclude stability seems to me to be the very thread that Vereker's "pearls are strung on" or which his figure is weaved with. Because to realize the importance of the instability or the life force enables us to acquire a deeper knowledge of a fundamentally important thing such as Vereker's figure.

Here I have presented my own way of understanding the figure of Vereker. Then, is this really different from the way of those who tried to understand the figure with the help of keywords like "love," "karma" and the like? Is mine really different from the way of those who, contrary to their intentions, deprived Vereker's figure of its fundamental charm and significance? I think I can pride myself on my being able to answer in the affirmative. As the instability I have suggested is the natural unstableness of life itself, a great variety of figures can be described if this notion of instability is approved, while other notions many critics suggested do not allow us such great latitude. And moreover, this conception

of instability, unlike that of Hillis Miller's unreadability, does not fall into grey negativity in spite of its great latitude. Generally speaking, too much tolerance has a tendency to become similar to mild negation of everything. But the instability I have suggested, in spite of its great latitude, does not fail to produce a positive value, because it makes us concentrate, even for a short time, on a specified thing. It doesn't approve the homogeneous indifference to everything. Its great latitude is only the result of repetition of this kind of specified attention. So, specialization or sticking to one thing and tolerance or allowing a great variety do not exclude each other in the notion of the instability. If we accept this notion, "unreadability" does not exclude the notion of readability, though Hillis Miller doesn't admit the latter. Miller surely admits that readability and unreadability are the two sides of a coin. So, if the side of unreadability is emphasized, its opposite side must be emphasized, too. But Miller insists on the rightness of unreadability alone. Conversely speaking, if readability is affirmed and a great variety of figures are described, unreadability or indescribability must be affirmed at the same time and all described figures have to be relativized. And yet, they must not be relativized uniformly and undifferentiatedly. As was said before, the relativization of them has to be the result of their having been experienced, or it will easily be degraded into tepid negation of everything. To avoid falling into such poor and prosaic negation, both readability or describability and unreadability or indescribability will have to be strung on the thread of unstable natural life, the insecurity of which does not exclude security. Strung on the thread of life, all opposing conceptions will cease to be exclusive to each other. Then, both the describability and indescribability of Vereker's figure will be affirmed with the life force which never cease changing freely and endlessly.

Notes

1 Henry James, "The Figure in the Carpet," New York Edition, Vol. 15, p. 246.

All further references to this edition appear in the text.

2 Joseph Warren Beach, "The Figure in the Carpet," in *The Question of Henry James : A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. F.W. Dupee (London : Allan Wingate, 1947), pp. 107-119.

3 Joseph Conrad, "The Historian of Fine Consciences," in *The Question of Henry James*, p. 62.

4 Leo B. Levy, "A Reading of 'The Figure in the Carpet,' " *American Literature*, 33 (1961-62), 457-465.

5 Quentin Anderson, *The American Henry James* (New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 1957), 148-149.

6 Levy, p. 465.

7 Dorothy M. Boland, "Henry James's 'The Figure in the Carpet' : A Fable of the East, "*Papers on Language and Literature*, 13 (1977), 428.

8 Boland, p. 425.

9 Boland, p. 428.

10 Rachel Salmon, "A Marriage of Opposites : Henry James's 'The Figure in the Carpet' and the Problem of Ambiguity," *ELH*, 47 (1980), 788-803.

11 J. Hillis Miller, "The Figure in the Carpet," *Poetics Today*, 1, No. 3 (1980), 107-118.

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